



# Happy Birthday

Not all birthdays are really happy. Bumps, bruises and a one-night stand are not exactly how Shina had planned on spending her thirtieth birthday. Then, the next day things change in every other area of her life, she decides maybe her thirties won't be so bad after all.



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The morning starts right where the previous evening left off – lousy. The tears that fell last night left red marks that are still quite visible in the morning sun. Shina stands and stares at herself, can this be the self-confident woman, who only last month, was bold enough to ask for a job in another department she knew she was under qualified for? Is this the same woman who has worked her tail off to prove her worth and has won the praises of all her peers?

Then why is it that when no one calls her on her birthday does she fall apart like a little school girl? Why can’t she accept that when you turn thirty no one is rushing to give her hugs and candy and tell her happy birthday anymore? Why? Because everyone else she knows has a life, because all of her current friends or co-workers have spouses or significant others to celebrate with. That’s why. And don’t even get her started on her family.

Shina never felt she was a well-liked individual; she is not exceptionally pretty – some have even referred to her as the ‘definition of a plain Jane’ – she isn’t particularly funny either. Some people think she gives them the cold shoulder all the time; when the truth is, she doesn’t know how to start a conversation. Well, not really all conversations, only small talk, the kind that one has casually with the people around them. If she has to give a presentation at work, she doesn’t give the wording a second thought. Presentations are easy to do, she knows what she is saying and practices the whole thing a few times before she has to present. When someone in her office needs her to do work, its straight forward instructions and all she has to do is follow them, there is only so much to say and the presentations are usually scripted based on the type of account but people don’t come with scripts. With people, you have to think on your feet.

“But seriously people, how hard is it to call, text or e-mail two words.....happy birthday!” She says out loud and checks her social media pages again – nothing. For some people, turning thirty would be a milestone big enough to make a celebration. But Shina is not worthy of such celebrations and she is not bold enough to create a party for herself either. She decides to call in sick today; she has a few days coming to her anyway since she hasn’t taken a day off since she started five years ago.

“Hello, this is Shina. What? Oh, I work on the fourth floor with Mr. Banes. Yes, I’m calling in to say I won’t be in today due to personal reasons. No Maám, I’m not sick, yes, I understand this will be a vacation day. But I’ve never taken a sick day before. Yes, I understand, company policy and all. Sure, it’s not really a problem. Thank you.” It’s not as if I have a reason to take vacation anyway, she says out loud to herself after she hangs up.

Shina finishes getting dressed and goes out to her kitchen to get her day started. The first thing she sees is the rain clouds coming in. Within minutes the rain starts. “Why shouldn’t the rain and gloom come today?” she says out loud again. Now, what should she do with her day off? She has never taken a day off before. She walks around the apartment to see what needs to be done. There is some cleaning up she can do, laundry can be done, groceries to shop for. Shina sits down on the couch and puts her head into her hands.

Shaking her head into her hands and tearing up she screams, “Wow! I’m turning into an old spinster.” In any era, it’s the same thing. She starts to pace the floor now, thinking to herself, she fits the stereotype to a tee. Shina sits down again to wallow in self-pity; she figures she is entitled to some today. She needs to go out and do something that will make her feel whole again. To

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prove she matters, sure, she can do all the errands she needs to do, but she has to do something special, something that is worthy of a milestone birthday.

Shina packs her purse and gathers all the things she needs, dresses and suits to be dropped off at cleaners, box to be shipped to her ungrateful brother, and her grocery list. All of which should take her a total of an hour or an hour and a half – after that, she has to figure out what she wants to do with her day off.

Holding her head high, she walks out, willing her day to be different. First stop done, the next finished and her final one is to the grocery store. She brings back the groceries to her apartment, puts away all that is perishable and finds herself at a loss already. She went to the farthest stores she could find in order to kill time and it isn’t even lunchtime yet.

Shina sits down and cries, again, how has thirty years come to this? She thinks. “I can’t even say I’m an old cat lady because I’m allergic to them. Oh, God!” she cries into her own hands. Her so-called friends are really only people she works with, she does not have a group that she ‘hangs’ with, nor does she have any people that she calls on with any regularity, outside of family. So, why is she so surprised that no one has acknowledged her birthday? She is not the only one who acknowledges people’s birthdays in the office, everyone knows each other’s birthdays, it’s in their files. Her gut is tightening again and she feels like she is going to wretch.

The tears keep coming and Shina finds herself sitting on her knees in the middle of her living room floor. ‘This has got to change,’ she thinks. Shina goes to her room to shower, she pulls on her best day dress, adds a little make up, puts her hair in a quick up-do and leaves again. This time, she is going to another area. She is going to investigate a whole new area of town, somewhere that she has not been to. ‘Hmmm’ she thinks – what about the south side of the city? The city is always the right place to go, that’s what everyone at the office says anyway.

Driving to the south side should not take long. She heads east on the main roads and traffic is pretty light. Shina is listening to a great song and waiting at a traffic light, **BAM!** She is pushed forward with a horrible jolt and shaken up quite a bit. Her head and arm hit the steering wheel pretty hard and her eyes quickly become blurry. She looks up to see the light is still red. She tries to turn around to see who or what hit her, and she sees a man on a phone yelling angrily – she can’t tell if he is yelling at her or on his phone. She dials 911, “Hello 911 operator, what is your emergency?”

“Hel.....hello. I’m at the corner of 12<sup>th</sup> and Birch and I have been hit from behind pretty hard.”

“We will send someone out immediately, are you hurt?” the operator asks

“No, shaken. Maybe I bruised my knee, or my face I can’t tell. The man who hit me is yelling on the phone – I don’t want to get out to check on my car, I’m a bit scared,” Shina’s voice is very shaky and she feels her heart rate increase along with her breathing.

“Not to worry, I will stay on the line until help gets there. Do *not* get out of the car if you don’t feel safe. The police will be there soon. Maám why are you crying? Are you sure you aren’t hurt, are you ok?”



“It started to rain again....hap....py bir..thday to me,” Shina cannot keep the tears from falling right now. She is not so sure taking a day off was a good idea after all. Looks like she will be remembering her thirtieth birthday after all, for a long time to come. But not for the right reasons.

“Help is on their way. I hope the rest of your birthday is happy,” the operator says in a calm voice.

“Me..... too,” Shina says as she tries to pull herself together – for a thirty-year-old she sure is acting like an emotional mess. She gets herself to a point of being able to talk. “Oh, I see the officer now, he is getting out of his car and coming to me. Thank you for waiting.”

There is a knock on her window, “Maám, are you hurt? Can you find your license and registration for identification?” the officer asks calmly.

Shina turns slowly to reach her purse, for some reason she is moving in slow motion, she hands him her wallet, “They are both in there.” She feels tired and wiped out. The officer smiles at her and says, “happy birthday Shina – my brother’s birthday was yesterday, same year – hey are you twins?” his attempt at humor doesn’t quite get the smile he’s hoping for.

This is the first genuine birthday greeting she has received. Shina smiles but finds it a bit hard, comes out more as a wince. She puts her hand to her mouth and realizes that her cheek is swollen. ‘Wonderful’, she thinks to herself.

“The ambulance has arrived, I suggest that you go and get yourself checked out – you want to rule out a concussion by the way you were shaken up.” He opens her car’s door as the EMTs get to her car. They give her the initial assessment in the car and ask her if she can stand on her own. She shakes her head yes, and the officer helps her to stand up. Only she feels a bit woozy so instead, the EMTs bring a gurney over quickly and have her lay down. “Is there someone you’d like for me to call?” the first EMT worker asks.

“No, there is no one,” she answers slowly.

“No family?” the EMT asks again

“None that care enough, but thank you for asking anyway.” Shina knows she is being annoying right now, but it is the truth. “What will they do with my car?”

“The officer said they will have your car towed to the nearest garage that does body repairs and he will let you know where the car is taken to. If you want my opinion, the old thing looks totaled. You didn’t see the back of your car but you’re pretty smashed in. You were hit by a car twice your size,” the EMT is full of information she doesn’t want to hear. Great, a new car is exactly what she wants to buy right now.

“We are going to bring you in for observation. You have a nasty bump on your head and cheek so we want to make sure there is nothing else going on. Are you sure there is no one to call?” He seems like a nice guy, she shouldn’t give him a hard time.

“No, really, my family is all out of town, they couldn’t help if they wanted to and a big *if* at that. That’s how they operate, don’t worry about me, I’ll be ok,” Shina tells the simple truth. Sometimes that’s all you can do.

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Benny has been at Rocko’s bar for two hours now. He doesn’t know what to do. He has been trying for a week now to find a one-night stand. From the way the entertainment industry portrays the world, you would think there are a hundred and one women waiting for that same non-committal romp as he is looking for.

He leaves his table in the back and brings his drink up to the bar. The place is quiet. He doesn’t know what it looks like normally because he is only here on business. His fiancé was not happy to learn how much travel time he has before the wedding, but there is nothing he can do about that. He doesn’t own the company, so he has to comply. It is enough to ask for the few days off after the wedding.

The bartender walks over to him, “What will you have?” Benny looks back up and sees a nice man behind the bar, “Truth? I’m looking to get lucky.” As soon as he says the words, he regrets them. He must sound like a scum bag.

“So are a lot of guys, but somehow I don’t think you are the same. Not from around here, are you?” the bartender asks.

“No, here on business, will be leaving tomorrow night.” He looks back down at his drink, then around the bar and back at the bartender, “Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure”

“Were you a virgin when you got married?” he asks rather shakily.

“Excuse me? Well, that’s a new one – but to be honest, the answer is no. Why do you ask?” he watches Benny’s reaction. This gentleman in front of him is blushing, he is actually asking a real question, not a bullshit one. ‘Whoa – this guy wants to figure things out before the wedding day?’ The bartender thinks to himself, “Hey man, when’s the wedding?”

“How’d you know?”

“Written on your face, but that’s only because I’m a trained bartender/psychologist, don’t worry, no one else can tell. You haven’t been with *anyone*?” he is curious now

Benny does not know why, but he feels compelled to tell this total stranger what he is thinking. Maybe to help take the burden off his head or ease his conscious that it’s not considered cheating if it’s ‘training’.

“Ok, don’t laugh, but I’ve been watching porn on my business trips to try and get an understanding about what I’m supposed to do, but they don’t seem real. I figured, if I find someone before the wedding, I will at least know what this is supposed to feel like. You can’t tell that from a movie or a book. You only see action, no feelings. I know – weird, huh? I probably should go to my wedding bed and figure this out as I go along. Hopefully, she won’t think any less of me.” Benny bows his head, again, he is getting pretty used to looking at his shoes instead of in the eyes of the person he is talking to. No one understands why this is important to him. He has had this embarrassing conversation four other times already on this series of trips. Maybe he should simply keep his mouth shut. For generations virgins met on their wedding night, why does he feel he needs to be different?

The bartender is trying to take this all in. He does not want to laugh at the guy, in fact he feels a bit sorry for him. Trying not to sound obnoxious he says, “What about a hooker then?”



“Oh, no – I could never do that – diseases and all. That would freak me out. Besides, they would laugh at me and most likely I would learn nothing from someone who does sex mechanically – they can’t possibly *feel* anything anymore.”

The bartender says, “Hold that thought – customer,” he walks down to the other side of the bar to help out another customer. Easy scotch on the rocks but, as he is fixing the drink, he thinks about what this guy is saying. There may be some truth, or not – he does not know actually. He has only been with women he has dated – and for the past ten years, his wife and only his wife. Each time there is a lot of emotion involved.

He walks back to Benny, “Listen, I feel for you. But how are you going to go about this? You think you can go up to someone and say you’re looking for a one-night stand? Most women will not answer to that at all. They don’t want to feel cheap, even if they don’t want any more than you do.”

“I’ll guess I have to keep trying the honest approach,” he sighs, “I don’t know any other way.”

“Hasn’t worked for you yet, what makes you think it still will?” The bartender is trying not to make light of his predicament but the guy is not making this an easy conversation.

“I don’t know, my friend, I can’t seem to bring myself to lie about what I’m looking for though. This is probably a conversation for the books huh? Bet you never thought you’d be talking about this with a customer in their late thirties. Thanks for letting me talk, sometimes it’s better to hear what I’m thinking out loud. The fact that you didn’t laugh at me, makes me feel like I’m not a lone wolf here. Can I have one more whisky sour?”

“Sure man, hey, good luck. I’ve been married ten years now, and we are happy as can be. One more question though...” Before he can ask, Benny interjects, “No, she doesn’t know, and yes, she has been with a few people before me.” The bartender smiles, hands him his drink and pats his hand on the bar, “This one’s on me.”

Benny nods in appreciation and turns to go back to a table by the window. A couple minutes later a really nice looking woman walks into the bar. She seems like she has had better days. Benny watches her for a few minutes and sees that she orders one of those drinks that come with a cute umbrella.

Shina takes a sip of her drink. She has no idea what she ordered, she told the bartender she needs something to celebrate her birthday and forget about her day all at the same time. Tastes fruity and yet, has an alcoholic kick after you swallow.

Shina spent the past six hours at the hospital. Six whole hours, practically her whole work day. They would not let her leave until they did all the tests and scans to make sure she didn’t have a serious head injury and that no ribs were broken by her slamming into the steering wheel. The doctors didn’t even know cars were still on the road without airbags. She kept telling them she bought a used car because she doesn’t drive much. She takes mass transit to work every day. They thought she was given bad advice about the car. One doctor even offered to help her find a new one, one that is safe.

The only bright side to the event is that the officer from the accident came to see her in the hospital and told her that the charges the other guy faces are a DUI and reckless endangerment of



a minor. He was driving with his kid in the car sitting right behind him, she never even saw a kid. He told her where her car is and he too said the repairs are going to be more than the car is worth but that it may be possible she can get a new car via the other guy’s insurance. He gave her his card, in case she has any further questions as to what to do from here.

The hospital is not too far from a strip that is popular with the locals. Filled with about a dozen restaurants and bars that cater to all kinds of people. She hadn’t eaten lunch and it is almost dinner time by the time she was released, so she walks over to a nice restaurant for dinner, alone. Wasn’t so hard to sit alone, she does that all the time, it was harder to ward off the stares to her face though. Then she left and walked down the street to this bar. Why this one? She was tired and wanted to sit down is all. Seems that accident took more out of her than she thought.

Shina is not one to drink a lot but she has, on occasion, enjoyed one or two drinks. Birthdays seem to be a good reason to have one. She has to call a cab to take her home anyway since she now has no car. So, here she is sitting at a bar all alone again and trying to make sense of her day. She has only been put on regular over-the-counter pain meds so she doesn’t think much of nursing one drink for a little while.

Benny sees that no one is coming to sit next to her; she isn’t looking at her watch or over her shoulder as if she is expecting anyone. He gets up and sits down next to her. The first thing he sees are the fresh bruises and they are on her face.

“Are you ok? That looks like a nasty bruise?” he is trying to sound friendly, but his voice is nervous.

“Thank you for noticing – no, I was in a minor car accident today and this is my door prize – no pun intended,” Shina answers in a sarcastic tone – she is not sure why though, it’s not how she talks to people usually. Actually, she doesn’t usually talk to strangers at all. New decade, new persona she thinks to herself, or the knock to her head.

“Well, I’d rather hear that this is from an accident over hearing something that size came from a boyfriend. If you are lying and this bruise is from him, I would suggest taking you down to the police department. I’ll take you there personally,” he is sure of himself now. He would never tolerate anyone mistreating a woman like this.

Shina looks at this man in the eye and realizes he is serious – he would take her, a perfect stranger, to the police because he thought something else happened. “That’s very nice of you, but seriously, I was at a red light when someone, who turned out to be drunk, came straight into my backside. I’ve spent the past six hours being checked for everything under the sun. Bruised they told me – well without a medical degree I could have told them that,” she ends with a sarcastic tone again.

“They were being cautious – I’d rather that, then have them leave something out while you go home and get sick.” His response to *what* she says is sincere, not how she says her words– that was nice, because her tone is not, she is still not sure why. Anxiety maybe?

“Well, thanks – I’ll be ok, they say, a couple days and I’ll be back to normal.” Shina is not sure why she is talking to this stranger, mostly because, no one talks to her, or so she thinks. This has to change or she will never have a life. Ok thirties, here she comes, she says encouragingly to herself for the second time since he sat down.

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“I’m going to write something down for you – please don’t read this until I leave, ok?” Benny takes out a pad of paper from his jacket and begins to write something down. He says the honest truth – that he is looking for a one-night stand so that he knows what to do on his wedding night next month. He tells her what hotel he is staying at and that he will be waiting in the lobby for the next hour. If she shows up, that would be great. If not, he understands. Then he wishes her well in all her endeavors and signs, simply, B.

Shina takes the folded piece of paper from his hand and smiles. She says thank you for the conversation and he leans over and kisses her sore cheek as if they were old friends. She watches as he leaves. Then she turns her attention to the paper in her hand.

The bartender is watching this and feels he needs to tell her the truth. Completely weird that this guy is asking for this, but how honest could he possibly be? Really, who in their right mind would ask for this? He walks over to ask about her drink and sees tears in her eyes. Oh, damn he said something stupid in that note.

“Maám, can I help you? I saw the other customer hand you a sheet of paper. If there is a problem, I can get you help,” Rocko is very cautious now, why would she be crying?

“I’m ok; you see, today is my birthday and no one called, texted, nothing. I decided to take a day off, but then I get into a car accident with no one for the EMT to call and notify. I proceeded to spend six hours at the hospital being scanned and looked at but then I leave and within the period of an hour and half I have now been offered help by two people I don’t even know. Both you and the nice man who left,” she says through her happy tears.

“He offered to help you? In what way?” if this is a ploy to her he is certainly going to convince her not to go.

She told him how he said he was going to come to her aide if it was a domestic violence issue, and then she slid the paper over to him. “Have you ever seen anything so sweet in your life? Someone has picked me – me of all people to be their first. I don’t even have construction workers whistling at me, and here, today of all days, this man from nowhere offers me this. Even if part of this is not true – picking me makes this definitely worth considering. Since my week has started off so crappy – maybe I should do something that will make me feel needed/wanted. Even if it’s only for a little while, because up until now – I’ve got,” she pauses to take a breath, “well, I’ve got, nothing.” She sighs and slumps her shoulders down.

The bartender finishes reading the note and is astounded by her reaction. This guy could be doing this all over the country, he could be scanning unsuspecting souls all over. But then again, why? He is a nice looking guy, there would be no reason for him to feel that way. Man, he is right – this is one for the books. “If you are sure, go, but if you have any problems with him, *any* at all, you come right back here and ole Rocko will take care of everything, ok? I have his credit card and I can find him, if we need to.”

“Ok, that’s sounds good. His hotel is around the block and you are here for another few hours. How about this, I will stop by before I go home, so you know I’m ok,” she sounds so sure of herself right now and that makes no sense, even to herself. She takes the note back and writes her phone number on the back, “If you don’t hear from me before closing, call me.”

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“Deal. Um, well, I don’t know what to say, enjoy?” Rocko says slowly mostly because he is confused and uncomfortable knowing what is about to take place with these two complete strangers. Not that he hasn’t seen pick-ups before in his place, but usually it’s all speculation, this time there are known facts.

Shina slides off the bar stool but not before leaving a large tip for the bartender. She walks out with her head held high and her spirits up. Maybe this is what the doctor ordered, do something to take her mind off of what happened earlier in the day. She can hopefully feel whole, like a real person, like a woman. Most importantly, like someone who matters.

Shina walks into the hotel lobby and does not see the man right away, instantly she is starting to feel that she has been taken as a fool and that he is going to pop out from behind a wall with his friends and start laughing any minute, but then she feels a hand on her shoulder. She looks up and he smiles. He has a great smile.

They walk hand in hand towards the elevator. No talking on the ride up and none still as he opens the door and they walk into the main part of his suite.

He puts down his keys and she puts down her purse, near the door. Quietly, Benny walks over to the windows and opens the curtains and the window itself to get a breeze blowing. When he gets back to Shina he says, “I hope I don’t make mistakes tonight. I’m new at this,” he leans down and kisses her, this he knows how to do, his fiancé tells him that all the time.

Pulling her head away for a moment, she says, “me too.” They stare at each other’s eyes not knowing what to do next. “How about we remain quiet and explore,” she says.

Benny obliges her, he remains quiet as he kisses her again and she him. They slowly find their way to the couch and start to discover that getting undressed on a couch is a bit difficult, so they slide to the floor.

Minutes add up quickly, they are together for a little over an hour and a half, nonstop. Finishing for the second time, Benny finally speaks. “I was not sure what to expect. You far exceeded anything I was thinking about. I suppose I have more stamina than I thought,” he says shyly.

Laying there naked next to this perfect stranger, Shina can’t think of a better way to spend a milestone birthday. The doctors told her to avoid any unnecessary physical activity for a while, but she and this stranger didn’t seem to have any problems, her bruising didn’t get in the way. Although she may regret this later, right now, she is fine. She carefully gets up and goes to gather her clothes.

“Do you mind if I shower first before I leave?” she asks in a quiet voice.

“Sure, go ahead. I’ll clean things up out here.” Benny is exhausted and exhilarated at the same time. His fiancé is in a different time zone, so he is not scheduled to call her for another hour and this fine lady Shina will be long gone by then. Now he knows, his bride will be happy on their wedding night. If it turns out like this, with a stranger, then she will be thrilled, he is sure it will be better because she is the woman he loves, wow, he can’t wait for the wedding night.

Shina finishes her shower and dresses, she uses the hair dryer in the bathroom to at least get her hair half dry before she goes out in public. Opening the door, she sees that he has indeed



cleaned up and is waiting to use the bathroom himself. She walks over to him with her hand outstretched, “Thank you for making my birthday worthwhile.”

He shakes her hand and answers, “It was equally my pleasure and my honor My Lady, good luck with all you do, with recuperating and all. I hope you find someone special soon.” She smiles and walks out of the hotel room feeling surprisingly well. She is not feeling bad about what happened at all, not guilty either. As a matter of fact, she is actually feeling rather well, Shina is even thinking that if this guy is running around telling a whole mess of women the same story, right now, she doesn’t care, because he made the time with him so special, made her feel special. She walks out of the hotel and around the corner back to the bar. She walks in and makes eye contact with the bartender – he runs around to the front of the bar and comes straight to her.

“I was getting worried. You ok?” He watches her eyes, and checks her body for any additional bruising that might be visible.

“I’m fine, thank you. What do you recommend for ending this fine day with? Another fruity drink or should I get a cab and head home?” she is not nervous at all, she is speaking with confidence.

“I’ll call you a cab – ok?” he is happy all turned out well – weird, but well. His wife is never going to believe this story. He is not sure he does yet. Although, he thinks to himself, if that guy ever comes back in and gives someone else his story, he will call him out on being a liar. He has no tolerance for such things.

Shina gets into the cab and tells him where to go. Not the day she had planned for herself, but certainly one to remember. She will deal with her car tomorrow. Also thinking that while it was a nice reprieve from real life, being with a stranger like she was, she doesn’t think she will ever do something so far from real life again.

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The morning alarm is going on and Shina is laying there trying to move. All that good feeling from last night is over and has been replaced with pain and bruising in more places than she can count. Maybe it wasn’t such a good idea to go to the man from the bar. What was his name again? Doesn’t matter, they were not meant to see each other ever again anyway. No strings attached. That’s what they both agreed to.

Never, in her wildest dreams, would she have seen herself as someone who could last that long with a man, not to mention the amount of pleasure it gave her in ways she only read about in those dime store novels her mom used to try and hide. Things are clearer now, that he may not be telling the truth, no one learns that much from watching porn, do they? Doesn’t matter. She needed it as much as he did and that was that. No harm done to anyone. Unless he is carrying some sort of disease. She will get that checked as soon as she can.

Well, time to get ready for work – she is only supposed to take off one day, and that day is certainly over. But something is preventing her from getting up, besides the pain. Motivation, she has none. She does not feel compelled to go to work at all. She needs to change things around. Needs to get herself in a place where she can nurture the confidence of last night. It’s a good thing she sets her alarm to wake her with enough time to be lazy in the morning. She spends some time

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laying in her bed and thinking, she realizes she does not like her job, acquaintances or even her neighborhood. A total transformation is in order. “But where do I start?” she says out loud once more. Talking to herself is normal for her, she has no one else. “That’s sad Shina.”

When she was in the hospital yesterday, everyone there was concerned for her, she is certain that she would not have received the same sympathy at work or even from her family. Today is test day, she will go to work and report what happened to her yesterday and then ask for the day off so she can recover better and deal with her car situation. Getting moving is painful, her back hurts and her left arm is especially tender.

Shina decides it’s best to go check her bruising out in the mirror. She stands naked in her bathroom in front of her full-length mirror. What she sees, surprises her. She has bruises all over her chest – must be from when she hit the steering wheel, the bruising looks like an arch. Her left arm has some bruising and swelling she did not see yesterday, and the side of her face is worse than ever. No one told her to expect this. Maybe she will call over to the nurse who gave her a business card, and then she will go into the office or do whatever it is the nurse tells her to do.

She showers slowly because moving around now seems difficult. When she gets out of the shower, she decides to call her mom first, even though she is away, she wants to hear her reaction.

“A car accident? Wow that sucks honey, and on your day off, that must have been a real bummer,” her mom says. No mention of her birthday, no mention about why she took a day off, nothing, only, ‘that sucks’

“I’m ok Mom – I have some bruising here and there but they say that will fade away in a couple of weeks or so. Nothing a little make up won’t cover,” she tries to make light of the situation which only makes her feel worse.

“Well, if the other guy is at fault, you make sure he pays for your pain and suffering and not just your car. Maybe this will teach you a lesson about buying an old car, you need a new car with all the safety features that comes with something new. Honestly, you’d think that someone with your brains would have known that. I’m off to my spa appointment, have a good day,” and that is that, her mom clearly stated where her priorities are and it isn’t her.

Time to call the nurse, “Hello, is Nurse Lang there? I’m Shina, I was in there yesterday after being in a car accident, she said I could call if there are any problems, and I think there is,” Shina is a bit nervous waiting for the nurse to respond.

“Honey, Nurse Lang is only on in the afternoons, wait a sec and I’ll pull up your chart from yesterday. Ok? Don’t hang up, may take a minute or two with these computers being so slow this morning.” She seems nice, Shina thinks to herself.

After a couple minutes the nurse comes back on, “Ok, I found you, there was nothing broken, no obvious signs of concussion or brain injury. What seems to be the problem this morning?” she asks nicely.

“Well, I woke in a lot more pain than I was in when I went to sleep and there is bruising in places, I know for sure, were not there last night. Plus, my arm is feeling half in pain and half numb, with some swelling as well. I’m a bit more than just uncomfortable and I’m wondering what to do,” Shina is still sounding cautious.



“Not to worry, if you’d like to come back in, we can have a look and make sure nothing was missed yesterday. That is probably best. I can put you in for 10:30 and see you myself. Will that work? Sometimes additional bruising will show up later on but let’s make sure there’s nothing else.” The nurse is not rushing her, not saying she should have bought a better car, she is giving her a professional opinion with more concern in her voice than her own mother had.

“Sure, I can be there, I’ll have to call in at work, but that shouldn’t be a problem. I’ll see you then.” She is about to disconnect when she realizes, “Hello? What is your name?” she asks frantically.

“Sorry, I should have said that first, I’m Nurse Page. See you at 10:30,” she hangs up softly.

Shina decides she has enough time to take a cab to work and ask for the day off again in person, then get right back in the cab and be at the hospital by 10:30, assuming traffic isn’t too overloaded. She finishes getting dressed, slowly, as her left arm doesn’t want to cooperate much. Then she gets downstairs to hail a cab. Two cabs pull up to her at once, the second one is honking his horn for her to come to him. She looks inside and realizes the driver is the same one she took home last night. She gets in.

“Good morning Ms., I trust you slept ok. Going to work this morning?” the cabbie asks in a congenial way.

“As a matter of fact, I am, but I need you to wait outside because I have another appointment very soon, ok?” She is amazed that it is him. Last night he made it sound like he never comes to this neighborhood.

“Ok, I’ll wait, is the second destination near my neighborhood?” he asks.

“Actually, I’m headed back to the hospital, to follow up on yesterday,” Shina answers simply.

“Oh yes, the accident. I hope you are feeling better from that. Will you need another ride after that appointment?” Shina appreciates his enthusiasm but it is beginning to make her feel a bit uncomfortable.

“No, that will be enough. You can stop here at this corner, I’ll be out in about ten or fifteen minutes,” she quickly gets out of the car. Well, as quickly as you can when your whole body is in pain.

Shina walks into her office, shows her security pass and heads upstairs. She makes a stop at her desk to make sure nothing there is too important. Then she heads over to her boss’s office, which she sees is open. She knocks on the door – “Excuse me sir, can I come in?” her confidence is waning but she stands strong anyway.

“Sure, but make it quick. You were out yesterday, and I trust your personal business is finished so you can get back to work pronto,” he says sternly without even looking up. If he had, he surely would have seen her facial bruising and the fact that her left eye is still quite swollen.

“To be honest sir, yesterday I was in a car accident, I need to go back to the doctor this morning and take care of my car, they say the car is totaled. So, if you don’t mind, I need to take today off as well,” she stands there waiting for a reaction. Nothing, not even a flinch. What is with the people around here? Is it the water they drink? She feels like screaming, ‘did you hear me tell



you I was in a car accident? Can’t you see the bruising on my face?’ but instead she heads towards the door to leave.

“Just a minute young lady, you can’t drop a bomb like that on me and expect to leave. Sit down here and tell me what happened. Now,” he sounds like he gave her a command. This is very unsettling to Shina, she has never heard this tone of voice from him before and she certainly doesn’t like how this sounds.

However, she does as he asks, but she does not sit down, in fact, she does not even leave her spot, on principle. Before she finishes, she rolls up her sleeve as if he needed more proof of her bruising. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have a 10:30 appointment at the hospital,” she turns to leave again – this time no response. She gets back into her waiting cab and they leave for the hospital.

She arrives in time and probably overpays him and, as best she can, rushes inside. “Hello, I have an appointment at 10:30.” Before she can finish – the nurse in front of her says, “Shina? Glad to see you, come with me.”

She follows the nurse to a private exam room, who asks her to disrobe so she can see what has shown up. Somehow standing here this time feels more like she is on display than being examined. The nurse is turning her arms this way and that – sometimes she winces and sometimes not. She asks her to move her leg around as well and re-checks her stomach and chest. Then lastly, she checks her face.

“From what I see, could be, we missed a break on that arm. The rest of the bruising is natural – it’s one of those things that gets worse before it gets better, but I am more concerned about your arm. I see swelling over here as well, but you can’t really see with your eyes what is going on. An x-ray clearly can. Someone looking at you can only see part of the injury. I want you to go for another x-ray. I’ll have the doctor double check this first though. Here put on one of these robes,” she hands her a thin cotton robe instead of a paper one to put on.

The doctor comes in within a couple of minutes and agrees with the nurse. They send her for an x-ray, which was done by “Atilla the tech” because this person pushes and moves her arm and hand with absolutely no regard for her pain or the fact that the arm might be broken. She is waiting now in the original exam room where she saw the nurse. Another doctor comes in, “Hello, I’m Dr. Peterson, I’m the orthopedic doctor that evaluated your x-ray upstairs. Sorry we didn’t see this yesterday, you must be in a lot of pain. The arm is definitely broken and not in a good place either. I’m going to set you up right here in the hospital, what kind of shirt did you wear today?” he looks around the room and then says, “Please put this on first, then I’m going to have to cut this sleeve to do the cast, you will have to make sure you have wide enough sleeves for a while. I suspect this will be on for about six to eight weeks or so. Is this going to be a problem for you professionally?” he asks simply.

A broken arm? She has a broken arm and everyone here is so nice to her, wonder what Mom would say? Maybe best not to go there. Shina decides she will call her brother instead when she leaves here. Maybe even call the police officer who she saw yesterday. Shina sits there somewhat uncomfortably as the doctor sets her arm in a bright orange cast, the only color they have left in the room now. Doesn’t matter that much to her.

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“Ok, all set, wait here and the nurse will be back with your instructions and a sling, the way this had to be casted, you may want one for part of each day. I’ll see you back in six weeks, we will take another x-ray and check the healing.” He leaves the room after taking one last glance at his handy work.

The nurse walks back in, “Hi Shina – I have copies of your full report here, you’re going to need this for your insurance company and for the police report. I suggest that you do this today without delay. Insurance companies like to go after their money as soon as they can and if you even wait a moment the one that has to pay will stall terribly. Believe me, I’ve been through this already. Do you still have the officer’s name that brought you in? If not, it’s in the report as well.” The nurse has her sign a few pages and then wishes her well. She makes sure to give her a number to call the doctor for a follow up appointment or if something else comes up like headaches or back and neck pain. She also gives her some instructions as to how to take care of the rest of her bruising. Some homeopathic ways to help the bruising on her face fade quickly so people will stop asking questions.

Shina appreciates all the nurse has done for her. If some of these people worked in her building, they would never survive. No one there is generous or even kind. Shina has to decide what to do with her day, now that she is off again. By now, it’s lunch time so she heads back towards the street she went to yesterday. She bypasses all the restaurants and heads straight for Rocko’s place again. His is a nice place, the people were nice too, and if she remembers correctly, they served food as well as drink.

Déjà vu hits as she walks in and sees the same bartender behind the bar. She walks directly over to him and says hello. “Well, hello yourself, how are you....whoa – that’s new,” he says as he points to her arm. Hard not to miss that color.

“I woke up in more pain than I went to sleep in, went back to the hospital and they put this on about an hour ago, the one x-ray of me they didn’t take yesterday. Somehow the idea escaped them but now all will be good. I am wondering though what you serve here for lunch.”

“Nothing about this is from last night is it? Because I’ll beat the guy myself if it is, you’d better be honest with me,” he is looking at her sternly but in a brotherly way not the way her boss did either.

“I promise, last night was something I will always remember – strange thing as it was, who knew? Anyway, I’m obviously a bit under the weather and I’ve been doing a lot of thinking since yesterday. Maybe I’m in the wrong business, maybe I need to change my life around a bit. Any suggestions? Oh, and can I have a big sandwich and a giant pickle?” Shina can’t believe she didn’t hesitate to spill all her thoughts out to this person she only met yesterday.

“Change of life huh? Aren’t you a bit young for a mid-life crisis already? One chef special sandwich coming up, on the house,” he smiles.

The bar is filling up, looks like they get a really nice lunch crowd around here. A completely diverse group of people as well; she sees people in business suits, casual wear, uniforms and some uniform she can’t even identify. Two waitresses come from the back and are busily helping each and every person as if they are the most important customer they have.

“Your sandwich my friend,” the bartender says with a smile.

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“Shina,” she says quickly. She already knows his name is Rocko so it only seems fair that he knows hers. Shina turns back towards the bar and sees a sandwich the size of a cantaloupe. “Do people finish this in one sitting?” is the first thing she could think to say. The bartender laughs and hands her a fork to help her eat. She digs in with her one good hand and finds herself loving each and every layer of this lunch. There is no way she will finish now, but the rest will await her for another day and she will look forward to eating this then.

“Where do you live by the way?” the bartender finally asks.

“On the other side of the river, near the blue towers, you know the one by the ferry in the middle of the city?”

“Sure, hard to miss those dumb towers, architect must have had a good laugh at that one, figuring no one would have ever actually want them blue but then someone did, so now his name is on that monstrosity forever. Funny joke to me,” Rocko says smiling.

“I guess you’re right, I never thought of it as more than an eye sore myself. I live across the street in a small three-story building that has eight apartments. I go to work by public transportation so living there does make that part easy. But there is nothing warm about the area, no one knows anyone around them. I couldn’t tell you the name of any of the proprietors within a five-block radius of my place and they wouldn’t be able to identify me either. I’m looking for a friendly neighborhood and one that might offer me a better job as well.” Why does she find herself at ease enough to talk to people around here? What is it about the people around here that makes her so comfortable? She feels so willing to open up and have a chit chat kind of conversation. This has never happened to her before in her local eateries. Shina feels like she is living in an alternate universe right now. What on earth possessed her to say what she said? To actually say what she is thinking. How can she simply spill all that is in her unconscious to a person who is a perfect stranger to her and yet talking to him here feels normal.

“To be honest, there is an apartment above my store available starting next week. The guy wants to move closer to the city, maybe you guys can swap places. Want me to call him? I think he is home today,” Rocko says seriously.

Shina is excited at the prospect but her lease isn’t up for another six months. “Um, sure, why not.” She throws up her hand as if to dismiss the idea and to try and not show her enthusiasm. “Oh, and can you pack this up, no way I can eat this whole thing in one sitting.”

The bartender takes the half of sandwich and makes the call. Shina continues to nurse her drink when suddenly someone taps her on the shoulder. “Excuse me, Rocko here says you have a place by the blue towers is that true?” She swivels around to see one very large man standing in front of her with very intimidating eyes. She has to swallow a couple times before she can get a word out,

“Yes, I do,” she puts out her hand, “Shina – glad to meet you.”

“Mr. Drake,” he says quickly and shakes her hand. ‘Ewwww, his hands are so sweaty, and his grip is as light as a child’s. Wouldn’t have put those two things together based on his size.’ She thinks to herself. “How much is your rent, how many bedrooms do you have, are there hidden fees in your condo?” a very business-like tone about him.



“My rent is \$1700 a month for a two-bedroom apartment, not a condo, with a full bath, small kitchen, and a den.”

“HMMMMM, I thought there were only condos in those towers.”

“I’m not *in* the towers, I live across the street from them, you even said so yourself when you first approached me. However, we get to use their gym and other facilities at a discount if we show them our lease,” she points out.

“Can you leave tomorrow? I need to be close as soon as possible to where I need to be,” he says vaguely.

“I’ll have to call my superintendent, if you give me a minute, I’ll make that call.” She slips off her stool and heads outside to make the call. ‘Tomorrow?!’ she thinks ‘wow that’s a quick turn of events, but hey, what the hell’, she can still commute from here but she would certainly be happier coming home to this place. “Hello sir, its Shina I have something to discuss with you. Yes, I know you enjoy my cinnamon buns but no I haven’t had time to make them in a long time.

Listen, sir, something came up and I need to leave the apartment, but before you get upset, I have a person who is interested in moving in, it’s a man and I think he is a professional of some kind. What? No, not a personal friend, I was introduced to him a few minutes ago. Sure, let me bring him my phone, one sec,” she walks back into the bar and hands the man her phone.

The super and the new man talk for about ten minutes, her super is giving him the third degree like no other can. He hands back the phone, “You need to pack and be out by twelve o’clock tomorrow because that’s when I come in, he said he will have all the paperwork done so you aren’t liable for the apartment anymore. I’ll go clean up upstairs and before you ask, no, you can’t come see the place until I’m gone,” then he leaves to go back upstairs.

Shina sits back down on her stool to grasp the fact that her life has been upended with a single phone call. She decides to call her brother to get his take on what has happened in the past thirty-six hours. “A car accident? How hard did you hit your head? Now you want to change your whole life? Not that it is so exciting to begin with but you don’t have to change your life because of little accident. That’s plain dumb, man its times like these that make it hard to believe you’re the older sister. You’re lucky you only broke an arm. Next thing you’re going to tell me is you want to leave your cushy job too. Man Shina, as you get older you sure get stupider.”

“Get older? Is that your way of wishing me a happy birthday?” she asks sarcastically.

“What? Birthday? What the hell are you ..... Shit! Shina, why didn’t you say something? All this happened on your birthday?! That must really suck for you. Man, when I turn thirty my friends better have a full blow out for me. Hope the rest of the year isn’t as awful as it started. Sorry about the car man, I’ll help you look for a new one when I get back in town next week. Ok?” his tone totally changes to one that is brotherly not parental. ‘Wow, my brother might possibly care, at least a smidge,’ she thinks to herself.

“Thanks all the same, but I’m going to do this one on my own,” she announces. Looking up, she sees one of the waitresses sitting down near her waiting to speak to her. “Got to go, have a good week,” she hangs up.

“Hi,” she puts out her hand, “Maria, I work here as if you didn’t guess yet. I heard you are taking over Mr. annoying’s apartment upstairs. Welcome to the block. He never lets anyone



address him by anything that didn’t include the word Mr. in front. It’s a big apartment up there; two large bedrooms, kitchen, living room *and* dining room and one and half bathrooms. Rocko built the place for his daughter to help her and her husband get back on their feet. They lived up there for two years; they had two kids at the time and were a bit down on their luck. He is a great man, Rocko, saved my ass a couple times too, that’s who he is. You on your own? Sorry, I’m rambling,” she says.

“Yes, only me, I have a brother who talks to me sometimes and a mother who talks *at* me even less. Actually, she is too busy talking down to me to call it a conversation.” The two women share a laugh of understanding. The lunch crowd thins somewhat and they continue to get to know one another for an hour or so. What a difference a new place makes. Maybe all of Shina’s shyness is a simple matter of being so caught up in her little bubble that she forgot how to be herself. She used to have some friends that were real. Now that she thinks a bit, she lost touch with them when she started at this job, and the rest, when she moved to her current apartment. The realization that it has been all her fault is very unsettling. Like so many other realizations these past twenty-four hours or so.

Shina realizes she needs to get to the police station to deliver the papers and get some advice from the officer. She parts ways with her newly made friends at the bar and finds that she is looking forward to moving in tomorrow. They point her in the right direction for the police station and she proceeds to walk there feeling a bit more confident with each stride. Everyone around here walks, very few cabs around and that’s ok with her, she is looking forward to a less crowded area. To think all she had to do was cross over the tracks and find a whole new world. Ha, that sounds very cliché to her. Either way, she is enjoying her new adventure so far.

She enters the station and finds the officer without any trouble. “I see things didn’t work out as easily as I thought,” he says pointing to her arm.

She looks down, “Yes, the morning after, they discovered this today on re-examining me this morning. The bruises are worse but I was told they are healing the way they are supposed to. Anyway, the hospital told me to deliver this copy of my papers to you and that I am supposed to get a copy of your report so I can send them both to my insurance company immediately, before they ask, the nurse said payment comes easier that way.”

“Sure, she has a point, the more you give the insurance company upfront and the quicker, the faster you can get paid. Well, that’s the theory anyway,” he smiles at her in a way she is not used to. There is something different about his smile today. She watches as he finds her file and goes over to the copier to make copies, then he has to get a couple signatures and brings them back to her. “Do you have plans for dinner tonight? I see you must have taken off work again, being that it’s only 3:00 in the afternoon right now.”

Shina looks down at herself, she looks like a wreck. Did he seriously ask her to dinner? Is that ethical? She looks back up at him and is mesmerized by his deep eyes. They are forest green with a tiny speck of shiny gold in them. How could she have missed that yesterday? Oh yeah, she had been hit in the head.

“I look a wreck – been walking around with this torn shirt since this morning when the doctor had to cut off the sleeve to put the cast on. Now I have to go back to my place and pack



everything I own; I only have this afternoon. I decided to leave my place and when I asked Rocko down at the bar what to do, he suggested I move above the store and the guy who is presently there is moving into my place as of noon tomorrow. Guess I have to take off again tomorrow too then. Oh, that won't go over too well. I had a hard enough time today and that's with all this bruising showing as proof of the accident," she sits down to think what in the hell she is doing. Her head in her hand deciding how to tell her boss she needs another day off. Can she afford to pay for this apartment? No one told her how much anything costs. All these decisions have been made within the period of a couple hours. How could he have messed up her life so completely and so quickly? Her brother is really going to yell at her now. Forget what her mother might think, that is if she even acknowledges her new living quarters at all. Being that she will not be in 'the place to be' any more.

She never takes off work, now she needs three whole days, she never even had a day where she left early but three whole days off is surely going to get her fired. The boss is going to kill her. She may not have a job at the end of the week, which will definitely make paying rent a lot more difficult. Shina's nerves are getting the best of her and she is beginning to shake at all the changes. The officer sits down next to her and takes her hands in his. "A lot to swallow so quickly, especially doing everything alone. You look like you could use a friend. Tell you what, I get off in an hour, if you're willing to wait around, I'll help you pack up tonight because I don't know how you will be able to with that arm in a sling, and then I'll take you out for a late dinner. What do you say? Will you wait for me?" He is looking her right in the eye and he is looking rather yummy to Shina right now. Which he shouldn't be, but he is. How hard did she hit her head anyway?

'Is he kidding? Wait for him? No one ever asked her that! There is no way she can handle her thirties if every day is going to turn her upside down and around. She takes a deep breath, she might as well go with the flow, she thinks, so far, it's been good. Hasn't it?' "Sure, I can wait. Is there a waiting room for me to go to?"

He smiles at her again 'that smile is for me' she thinks as he continues with, "This is not a doctor's office my friend, wait here at my desk. I have to finish up some paperwork and I'd love the company," and yet another smile, if he doesn't stop this, she is not going to know what to do with herself.

"Can I make a call in here?" she asks, he shakes his head yes. Shina decides to call her boss and let him know that the arm is indeed broken and that the doctor suggests that she rests one more day. 'Yes, that's what I'll say'. Deep cleansing breath, then she dials her boss's number. The one they are supposed to save for emergencies. She considers this an emergency even if he doesn't.

"Yes sir, I understand that it's my personal business, but I thought you might want to know what happened and that I can't come in again tomorrow. There are things that need to be taken care of and I can't do them on company time. Yes, I understand. No, I am not trying to take my position as a joke, I never have. These are the first days I've taken off since starting there five years ago," she is getting angry right now. The nerve he has to argue with her about her time off being justified. He is calling her a liar and that she probably had a fall and is milking it for all it's worth trying to get money from some poor schnook who happen to bump her car.

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“No sir, I did not fall on anything while on a date, would you like to talk to the police officer who was at the scene of the accident? I’m sure he can verify that I was in the driver’s seat. As a matter of fact, I am at the police station right now.” She hands the phone to the officer who does not look very happy at hearing her side of the conversation. Truth is, he looks downright argumentative.

“Hello, this is Officer Johnson, can I help you? Yes sir, and you are?” there is a long pause. “In all honesty sir, I am not at liberty to share any news of the event except to family members. Are you related? Well, your questions can only be answered by the person involved in the accident, I probably am not even allowed to tell you that she was in the accident in the first place but since I heard her tell you then I am allowed to confirm the accident happened.

This is all you are entitled to know. You may think otherwise because you are her boss, but I owe you nothing and as a matter of law, she owes you the same nothing. I can’t imagine any employee walking around with bruises on their face and arms plus a cast on the arm and a totaled car, will lie about it, can you? Good day sir.” He hands Shina back the phone and takes a deep breath to calm himself down.

Shina takes her phone back slowly from his hand, touching him ever so slightly. “Satisfied sir? I hope to be in on Friday. I will most likely be able to finish the requisitions by then. I can try and work on them at home too. What? I don’t think you want to go there, sir. No, I’m not threatening you but you certainly sound like you are doing that to me. I will see you when I see you then,” she hangs up and looks over at the officer. He grabs the phone and calls some of his tech guys – he wants the phone call to be retrieved and set to record because he feels Shina may need to use the conversation in the future. “This may take more than an hour. How about we go for ice cream, by the time we get back they will be done.”

“I didn’t know that could be done after you hang up,” she says.

“We have our ways,” he winks at her, not telling her he hit record before he handed the phone back to her.

He stretches out his arm for her to hold, and she does. Walking around with Officer Johnson is really nice. Passing time with him is even nicer. When they get back to the precinct, the phone is given back to her, and an official dictation of the recording and the recording itself are now added to her file, one for her and one for them.

The two of them leave to go to her apartment. The super is waiting for her to verify everything. The guy from the bar has already been by to sign the papers necessary to make things move fast. He is impressed with the apartment and how well she kept each room. “He was in my apartment? That’s allowed?” she looks from the super to the officer.

The super is a bit nervous but he answers, “I figured since you were leaving, I’m sorry Shina I didn’t mean to frighten you. I promise he didn’t look through any drawers or even closets, I told him I’d give him one minute exactly and that’s all he took. Strange guy, we’re going to miss you around here,” he finishes.

“Thank you. Funny how he didn’t want me to see his apartment though. We’re going to swap. This is Officer Johnson, a friend of mine. He is going to help me pack up. I think I may stay in a hotel tonight. I’ll leave my keys in the box ok? I’ll call you with my new address for mail, I



don’t know what it actually is right now. Ok?” She sees actual tears in his eyes, “Do you?” she asks the officer.

“Sorry, this old man gets used to good people and then you leave. It’s always the good ones and we were such friends. Shina, I wish you all the best but I will miss you. By the way, Gretchen from upstairs told me about your accident, I haven’t seen you to tell you how sorry I am, and right on your birthday too. You take care of her sir. I don’t care if you are an officer of the law or not, nor do I care that you are larger than me, I’ll beat the crap out of you if I find out you’ve mistreated her, you hear me?” he directs his anger and tears towards the officer. Shina goes over to hug the old man and kiss his cheek.

So, she does have friends here. She never knew, she never appreciated them, how selfish of her. Not that she is having second thoughts about her crazy recent days, if only she had her eyes open to accept them as easily as she has accepted the friends at the bar. She will have to stay in touch. At least with the two of them.

The two new friends walk up together to her apartment where she is greeted by Gretchen. “Oh my, it *is* broken! You poor thing. Do you need help packing up? The old man told me you were leaving us too. You had better give me your number, we have to keep in touch. Who else can I talk to at 2:00am? Oh, you...” she breaks off and grabs Shina to hug her. This is quite uncomfortable but she can’t tell her so. Gretchen would come outside her apt and look to see if there was a light on in Shina’s apartment, then call her and complain about everything under the sun. “I’ll be ok,” Shina says, “I have someone with me today to help,” she points to Officer Johnson.

Gretchen finally turns around to see the officer standing there. He smiles at her and gives out his hand to shake hers. “Well, I guess this old lady won’t be needed after all then.”

Shina calls to her quickly, “Would you like to check to see that I don’t forget anything? You always are good at making lists to keep me in order.” She doesn’t really know how to handle these new found friends but she knows she doesn’t want these people, who thought of her as a friend, to be angry at her.

“I’ll go make a list and slip it under your door. You two youngsters can check them when you’re done,” she walks into her apartment smiling.

“She either will give us a huge list or a quick one, either way we should go get started.” Shina is getting butterflies in her stomach watching that smile of his.

They work for a little over three hours non-stop like a well-oiled machine, packing up all her dishes, calling down to the super for boxes that he somehow produces for her, checking and rechecking all the lists Gretchen keeps sliding under the door, getting everything out of all the closets, calling a movers to do an emergency pick up and beg for them to deliver the next day without too much over charge.

Shina is exhausted and finally plops down on the couch and falls asleep. She doesn’t even realize she has done this until Officer Johnson tries to wake her. “Hey sleepyhead, we have a dinner date remember? Don’t weasel out now because you’re tired.” She opens her eyes to see his eyes staring right at her and his head is about two inches from hers. “I was sleeping?” She sits up



and looks around, the only thing left is the couch she is sitting on. The apartment is empty, the movers are standing there waiting for her to get up.

Slowly she stands and the officer brings her closer to him. She is standing in front of him as the movers pick up her couch and carry it out. One guy comes back and asks for the address of where everything is going tomorrow but before she can say anything – Officer Johnson does, no surprise he knows the exact address. He also gave the address to the super as well as Gretchen. That made them so happy he tells her.

He whispers in her ear, “Ready for dinner? Or do you really need to sleep?” she slowly turns around to face him. God, those eyes! “Dinner sounds good. What time is it anyway?” her mouth is so dry as she speaks to him.

“9:30” he says simply.

“What? Why did you let me sleep so long? That’s crazy I still had so much to do!” He puts his hands on her shoulders.

“No, you had to rest, your neighbor Gretchen came by and saw you sleeping so she helped me do the rest. You do have at least two good friends here, huh? Anyway, we both realized the trauma and the work was too much so we let you sleep for a couple hours what’s the big deal? Oh, and by the way, can she bake brownies! I saved you yours. Come, let’s go to dinner before I start eating that brownie or something else that I find to be looking rather delicious,” his eyes bare down on and through her.

‘Is he serious? Me? All this help, all these friends. Has she been sleeping or something in her real life? No, not sleeping, pre-occupied with nonsense. She will stay in touch with Gretchen. She pulls out a piece of paper from her purse before they leave and writes down her personal number and asks for the address of the new place, he had to remind her he already gave her friends that address, she smiles to him, she slides the paper under Gretchen’s door. Gretchen always called her on the apartment phones, every apartment has one. As they leave the building, she hands another piece of paper with her phone number on it, to the super. He smiles at her but still glares at the officer. She leans over and kisses him on the cheek again. “Thank you, my friend,” is all she says, and he pulls her in for a hug.

All these hugs are killing her arm. Not to mention all the other bruised areas they are crushing. They leave right after that and she looks down at herself and says, “Holy crap, you can’t take me out looking like this. Let’s go find a hotel for me to sleep in tonight, we’ll order room service. No way can I go out like this, you are at least in a uniform.”

His left eyebrow goes up and he grins at her. “How about we go over to The Palace, they have nice rooms.” She shakes her head. It takes them only about ten minutes to get there. Immediately she asks the night manager, “is it too late to order room service, we are starved.”

“No maám it’s not too late. Let me give you our late-night menu. Here, room 5G, take the south elevators to your left,” he watches them with suspicious eyes.

“Problem?” the officer asks

“No sir, sorry,” the clerk leaves to go back to work.

Officer Johnson is carrying her overnight bag. Everything else is on the moving truck. They go up to the room in silence. This should be bothering her. Why is she so easily going to hotel



rooms with perfect strangers? What the hell happens when you turn thirty? You lose all inhibitions? You forget all your morals? But she doesn’t feel guilty, she feels very comfortable with these men. Odd.

The stupid elevator is stopping on each floor, Shina is losing patience, good thing she is only five floors up. Finding her room is no problem because 5G is right in front of the elevators. She opens the door and sees she was given a room with a king-sized bed and a hot tub to the other side of the room. What did the guy think she was doing here tonight? ‘Oh man, one room, for one night and she walks in with a man, holy crap she is sure ruining her reputation in this area before she even lives here, isn’t she? Or maybe, finally getting one. Too late to think about that now, look at the man you are with. He likes you, at least I think he likes me.’

“Nice room he gave us, a bit overstated, but clean all the same. What do you want to order? I’m looking at the soup and sandwich idea myself,” Officer Johnson is looking out the window and he turns around and sees her standing near the phone by the bed, “that sounds perfect make mine onion soup, if they have, and a deli sandwich.”

After ordering she starts walking around the room, she can’t get the cast wet so the idea of the tub being used is kind of funny to her. She doesn’t need a king size bed to herself, it might even be too big. The little kitchenette consists of a bar sink, mini fridge, and one plug-in electric burner. She checks the fridge for something to drink and as she stands up, her guest is right behind her again.

He takes the drink from her hand and sets it down on the table, he pushes her hair behind her ears and leans in to kiss her. Right before he does, he says, “I’ve been wanting to do this since yesterday.” The kiss is soft on her lips but it is so much more on the rest of her. He lifts his head, and she opens her eyes slowly.

“Is that the, I’m sorry you were in a car accident kiss or the happy birthday kiss?” she asks – a little surprised at herself.

“Actually, that’s the, I’m so glad I’ve met you kiss. Want to try for the birthday kiss now?” His smirk is contagious. She begins to laugh. He continues with, “I have been an officer for over ten years now, seen many women in trouble and never done this before. Ask all the guys, they tease me all the time that I don’t date enough. I tell them, I want to be bowled over, I want something more than seeing a pretty girl. I’ve seen plenty of them, and some are really great, but nothing has ever affected me more than when I saw you in that car. There is something about you that makes me want to be with you and only you, all the time.”

He stares at her and she at him. ‘What the heck? I just blew any chance I had, I spilled the beans before they were even in the pot. I can’t lose her, what should I say? God where is your brother when you need him?’ he is thinking to himself. He reaches back up to her shoulders and she watches him cautiously.

“Do you have a first name?” she asks innocently

“Gary Johnson at your service my dear.” His tone is a bit shaky, he has been with a number of women over the years, but none of them meant anything to him, a physical act because they were expecting him to, not because he wanted to be with them. Now all he can think of is being



with her, he would wait a year if she wants to. He doesn’t want to let her go, there is something about Ms. Shina that he is drawn to from deep inside.

“Well Gary, it’s a nice night outside, how about we sit on the balcony and get to know one another?” Hand in hand they go sit on the loveseat on the terrace and they begin to talk, the conversation goes from family to fantasies, their dreams and their realities.

The knock on the door reminds her she is hungry. “I’ll get the door,” she says “Thank you, I’ll take this from here. Yes, I’ll leave tray outside when we are finished. Thank you again, good night.” The food is on a cart with wheels, it’s easy to push with one hand. She brings the food in and then rushes back out to the door and calls to the bellhop, “Hold on, I didn’t give you your tip!” He stops and comes back and she goes inside for her purse but Gary is right there holding out some money. She smiles and turns to hand the money to the young man in his cute uniform.

“Thank you, Maám, enjoy,” he says with a lifted eyebrow and his eyes on Gary.

“That was a very generous tip, are you always so nice?” she asks

“Only to the ones I like. Would you like to see how generous I can be with you?” ‘that was a little too forward don’t blow this man’ he tells himself again. But he can’t seem to stop, not with her.

“I don’t know about you, but I need to eat before I do anything else this evening. We can talk about your generosity later,” she smiles at him and sees that he gives her an eager smile back.

Dinner is nice when two people can talk about anything they want. She has never experienced this before. They keep talking, politics, jokes, TV shows, music and the talking keeps going around and around, she feels as if she has known him for most of her life.

She finds out they have many things in common, including the urge to get new jobs. He promises to help her find something fun if she helps him find something less dangerous. They make commitments to each other with these and other promises. It’s as if she is having a month’s worth of dates, maybe even longer, in one night.

“In case you haven’t noticed, it’s really late and you probably will be wanting to leave soon, don’t you have work in the morning?” she asks him.

“I work the late shift tomorrow. I don’t go in until six o’clock in the evening. I can sleep until noon if I want to,,” he watches for her reaction; her eyes begin to twinkle with a touch of water on them.

“Do you sleep in your uniform?”

“Excuse me?”

“Well, I’m going to that bed over there and if you were planning on sleeping, I need to know if you will be in your uniform because if you are, I may have trouble with those brass buttons against my back.” ‘Did I invite him to sleep with me? Shina you are turning into a hussy, no not really, you are turning into a love sick puppy around him. Maybe tonight will be even better than last night.’ I can’t believe I’m even thinking this, she says to herself.

“I’m sure I can figure out something to wear, or not,” he says smiling again.

Shina is already up and walking towards the bed, she takes out her overnight bag and finds the t-shirt she packed to sleep in. With her back to Gary, she slowly takes off her shirt and bra then very awkwardly puts on the t-shirt by putting in the broken arm first, then her head, then the other



arm – ‘whoa that was a lot of work’ she thinks, she then loosens her skirt and lets it slide down. She pulls her side of the bed spread down, now the flat sheet and she slides herself in.

Somehow while she was struggling to get out of her clothes and thinking that he is watching from behind, she lays down to see, he is already there in nothing but his underwear, whispering in her ear as he pulls his body closer to hers, “only as much as you want, say stop at any time,” his breath sends tingles all down her back and body. Which reaches the furthest points and the important points.

“My arm will get in the way,” she hears him moan as he pulls her even closer, “we will have to get creative then, won’t we?” he answers.

Within minutes bodies are mingled, hands are holding on to body parts with softness and with great force at the same time. Words of pleasure are spoken as well as words of praise. Breathing gets harder and faster, heartbeats are rapidly increasing, small beads of sweat are developing and nerve endings are standing at attention.

This goes on for an undeterminable amount of time, until the moment when the two bodies co-mingle to the point of not knowing where one ends and the other begins. Where one body’s heightened awareness is at peak levels along with its partner and the only thing left to do is reach beyond that peak together and cry out in internal and external bliss.

Holding her now, he whispers, “Happy birthday my sweet Shina; in case you’re wondering, my birthday is next week.”

Blissfully they fall sleep, smiling.